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# Rhetorical Theories of Appalachian Literacy

Sara Webb-Sunderhaus

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne, [webbs@ipfw.edu](mailto:webbs@ipfw.edu)

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Sara Webb-Sunderhaus  
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### Rhetorical Theories of Appalachian Literacies

Katie's work is particularly meaningful to me because I am an Urban Appalachian from Cincinnati, and my identity informs my scholarship and my argument that we need a new theory of literacy for Appalachia. In some of my own work on Appalachian students in first-year writing courses, I've described Appalachians as "living with literacy's contradictions" in a "space where differing belief systems about literacy come into play and blend both institutional and regional contexts." Living with these contradictions is what's normal for many Appalachians. Whether we grow up on a long concrete block in Cincinnati or a holler in West Virginia, for many of us being Appalachian means living with contradictory attitudes about literacy all the time. At home we learn particular types of literacies; at school we may develop others; and church may bring still yet others. Sometimes lines between school and home, church and home, or church and school are blurred, as they were in my case. There may also be contradictory literacies within a single family, as I have found in my research and experienced in my own family life.

These contradictions arise because there are multiple, conflicting literacies circulating inside the region (a point to which I will later return). James Gee defines literacy as "mastery of a secondary discourse"<sup>i</sup> and refers to spaces like home, family, church, and school as discourse communities. It is in these discourse communities that we learn not only particular literacies, but also how to use and value these literacies and perform a literate identity, and when the literacies of different discourse communities come into contact with each other, conflict can emerge. Appalachia and its people are but

one example of this struggle, and as a result Appalachians negotiate among multiple literacy languages at any given time.

However, this resistance is complicated, because Gee's conceptualizations of an easily acquired primary literacy (in contrast to more contentious secondary literacies) do not hold true for Appalachians. Appalachians' attainment of our primary literacy is complicated by our contradictory understandings of literacy, as well as the understandings of our literacies by others. Appalachians grow accustomed to seeing ourselves (and our literacies) through our own eyes, as well as the eyes of others, and those eyes are not often kind. Locklear refers to this process as making identity decisions, and this process can be especially fierce for Urban Appalachians, who must negotiate an Appalachian cultural identity with other identities we are potentially developing in urban centers near the region—identities that may be constructed in opposition to Appalachian-ness. (reference Katie's work here)

Most literacy theories don't necessarily translate all that well to Appalachia because they are too general; they do not take into account the specifics of the region; and they come from scholars with different motivations, interests, and experiences. Theories are typically deemed to be successful if they are internally consistent and if they are broadly applicable; theories cannot be generalizable if they are too specific to a particular community or place. Yet given the contradictory and unique nature of Appalachian identity, a theory that allows for contradictions and that is narrowly applicable is what is needed. Such a theory does not currently exist. We need a theory of literacy of and for Appalachians that acknowledges literacy's contradictory nature and makes real distinctions among the functions and values of literacy for groups, families, and

individuals. While literacy scholars have theorized the influence of group identities and families on literacy, we also need literacy theories that account for the individual and his or her agency. An individual person in an individual Appalachian family may make decisions about literacy that have as much to do with his or her relationship with members of his or her Appalachian family than they do the stigmatizing, non-Appalachian world. In other words, we make decisions about literacy in response to not only the non-Appalachian world around us, but also other Appalachians, including our own Appalachian family members. For example, I share an Appalachian and family identity with all of my siblings, yet I made very different literacy and identity decisions, to use Locklear's phrase.

As literacy scholars, we tend to theorize people's literacy by looking not at individuality, but at an individual's group identities and the influence of his or her family. Our theories of literacy lead us to assume that the acquisition of primary literacy is an uncomplicated process that doesn't require us to make difficult decisions. Yet for many Appalachians, what Gee identifies as primary discourse (which includes literacy) may be hugely contested and contradictory within itself, and different within the same family, because Appalachian identity is so contested. Appalachians' acquisition of our primary discourse/literacy is not the same as acquiring language, because it's not something we simply absorb. It's a process that can be difficult and painful, due to the conflicted and contradictory nature of literacy in Appalachia, and this conflict is rooted in the fact that we are accustomed to understanding ourselves and our literacies through insiders' and outsiders' perspectives.

If we hope to develop a literacy theory of Appalachia, we must first acknowledge the long history of outside intervention in Appalachia that has shaped our multiple, and seemingly contradictory, literacies. Scholars such as Deborah Brandt and Harvey Graff have written about how literacy accumulates across generations; given that so many literacy sponsors have directly targeted (and continue to target) Appalachians, there is a tremendous accumulation of different ways to practice and value literacy circulating in Appalachian communities' histories, as well as individual family's histories. This is also why it is important for us to develop literacy theories that are specific to Appalachia. Appalachian is not a synonym for rural, and scholarship on rural literacies won't necessarily help us, due to the specific history of Appalachia I've identified here, as well as other factors: the long history of literacy interventions; the role of the extract industrial economy; the Great Migration out of the region; and the understanding of Appalachia as an "internal colony," as well as the critiques that have been made of this model.

Thus, Appalachia needs a literacy theory that is grounded in the region and is sensitive to its long history of exploitation and marginalization, without positioning Appalachians as passive victims or ignorant rubes. We need a theory that recognizes the value of Appalachians' culture, literacy beliefs, and practices without fetishizing them, and that acknowledges Ellen Cushman's argument that it is elitist and wrong to dismiss the efforts of marginalized populations to add to their literacy practices as "naïve" participation in their own disempowerment.

Instead, we need a theory that takes into account the multiple, seemingly self-contradictory notions about practicing and valuing literacy that circulate within a particular culture. Yes, literacy is violent, to use J. Elspeth Stuckey's term, but it is highly

contested, composed of opposing forces and fraught with conflict.<sup>ii</sup> On the one hand, literacy's power is limited. Contrary to popular views of literacy that position it as one of the necessary tools in achieving the American Dream of upward mobility, scholars such as Stuckey write that "literacy could not be found to produce much of anything useful" and that literacy is "exploitation." Gee writes that while the quickly-changing technological aspects of our society are often used as an argument for the importance of literacy, "increased technology often leads to deskilling people," the impact of which has often been felt quite harshly in Central Appalachia, where some of my family still lives and where I have done fieldwork. The closure of many factories, lumber mills, and steel mills in the region bears witness to the conclusion that, far from being a guaranteed ticket to an individual's "better life," literacy has become increasingly irrelevant.

And yet, these same scholars, as well as many others, position literacy in ways that demonstrate its immense social power. In her book *Selling Tradition*, Jane Becker discusses the history of literacy workers and social reformers who came to Appalachia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and founded settlement schools that instructed children in basic encoding and decoding while engaging in what Becker calls "cultural education," which "entailed selective nurturing and, when necessary, the reintroduction of particular archaic customs." This is the central contradiction of literacy: its power is simultaneously immense and limited. Yes, literacy is "violent" in the ways it limits the opportunities of those who, like Appalachians, are outside the culture of power. Literacy has been—and still is—used to dominate and oppress Appalachians, to romanticize and pathologize our culture, and to insure the maintenance of a particular social order. Literacy, in fact, has a tremendous amount of power—for good and for ill. Contrary to

the lessons we are often taught in school, literacy is not the solution to all social problems; literacy attainment does not guarantee the achievement of “a better life,” and literacy is used to deny rights and opportunities. While we must acknowledge how literacy has been deployed in Appalachia as means of cultural eradication, degradation, and marginalization, we must also identify how Appalachians can use “this piece of weaponry,” as Stuckey refers to literacy, to resist these forces.

For Appalachians—and especially Appalachian women—literacy can serve as a double-edged sword, one that both inflicts and prevents harm. Anita Puckett contends that while some Appalachians conceive of literacy as a “natural” feminine domain, the ways in which Appalachian women can use their literacies is still tightly monitored and controlled. Locklear argues that “the pursuit of new literacies [can impede] the performance of duties deemed appropriate by social gender standards,” and my research in Appalachian college writing classrooms provides evidence of Locklear’s claims; for example, one participant’s drug-addicted husband blamed her education for his addiction. Similarly, in *Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia*, Katherine Kelleher Sohn introduces readers to women whose husbands resent the women’s development of academic literacies.

For these Appalachian women, the attainment of academic literacies was fraught with multiple meanings; social forces such as a depressed economy and traditional gender roles limited opportunities to use their newly developed literacies in the workplace. Yet, these women still strongly felt that the literacy practices and beliefs they gained in college were worthwhile and meaningful in their lives. When I think of my life today in comparison to the lives of many of my relatives—especially those of my mother and

grandmother—it would be completely disingenuous for me to claim, as Stuckey does, that literacy did not “produce much of anything useful” in my life.<sup>iii</sup> In spite of the dangerous power of literacy to establish and enforce oppressive social norms, literacy can also wield a tremendous ability to improve the lives of individuals. Literacy *does* matter, particularly on the individual level where the benefits of literacy may be felt the strongest—but it may not matter as much as we think it does.

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